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ABSTRACT

Increasing demands for human services and current government fiscal policies may make volunteerism the major way of improving the individual living conditions and society as a whole. Extension agents are in the front line of persons capable of developing volunteerism at the local level. They have a direct link with local citizens and are familiar with existing local socioeconomic environments and needs. The leadership of extension agents in planning and implementing programs has already given them visibility in communities. Extension agents have also gained a great deal of expertise through working with millions of volunteers in program areas such as agriculture, 4-H, home economics, and community resources development. Recently, a panel of extension agents were asked about their activities in the area of volunteerism development. The panel suggested that funding, training, and evaluation are crucial for volunteer development at the local level. Objectives that are short-term and perceived to be relevant for the given group have the best chance of attainment. Although service to volunteerism adds job responsibilities that increase agents' workload, involvement in volunteerism development can have many benefits for the extension agents themselves and for the extension system as a whole. Accommodation of the voluntary sector in Cooperative Extension Service programs could have many mutual benefits for agencies in human service-oriented activities. (MN)

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EXTENSION AGENTS AS EDUCATORS FOR LOCAL VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT

by

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About the Author: Kathiravelu K. Navaratnam, a former faculty member of the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, earned a doctoral degree in Agricultural Education from Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, Virginia. As a volunteer leader in a community development center in Kaithady, Sri Lanka, he gained hands-on experiences in volunteerism through actual participation in volunteer activities. Presently, he is a volunteer at the Center for Volunteer Development at Virginia Tech, and also involved in human service activities through RAFT, a crisis intervention center. This article draws on his experiences and training received in volunteer activities in the United States.

About the Center: The Center for Volunteer Development, funded in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, was established in 1980 to strengthen the voluntary sector in Virginia through educational programs and problem-solving assistance. Using the delivery system of the Cooperative Extension Service, the Center engages faculty at postsecondary institutions in assistance to voluntary organizations that request help with problems and programs. In addition, it helps faculty members to understand and teach students about the importance of volunteerism, and assists with the development and adoption of syllabi, modules, and courses in volunteer management and development. A brochure explaining these and other services of the Center for Volunteer Development is available from Extension offices or the Center.

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EXTENSION AGENTS AS EDUCATORS FOR LOCAL VOLUNTEER DEVELOPMENT

The Center for Volunteer Development, in collaboration with the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, conducted a diffusion conference on volunteerism in September 1984. During this conference, a series of panel discussions was held by agents who have actively participated in the work of the Center. As an international conference participant, with experience in volunteerism and the Extension Service, I was motivated to put my thoughts together. This paper is the result. It reflects my own perceptions of using Extension agents as educators for local volunteer development.

I have just come from a diffusion conference on volunteerism that was designed to provide encouragement and ideas for adapting the activities of the Center for Volunteer Development at Virginia Tech to other land-grant and postsecondary institutions in the United States. As one of the conference participants, and as an individual with background in Extension, I asked myself why we bother with volunteerism. Don't we have enough other things to keep us busy?

The demand for human services will continue to grow. By the year 2000, if the current fiscal policies of government prevail, it may be necessary for us to deliver services through organized voluntary organizations. Volunteerism may indeed become the major way for us to improve the living conditions of individuals and make our society a more desirable one for all people.

A skeptic might argue that volunteerism is as old as civilization and ask why we should attempt to put additional resources into regenerating or rejuvenating the voluntary sector. There are several answers to that: The population of our country and the world continues to grow. This creates a plethora of problems not easily solved (e.g., pollution, hunger, water shortages, crime, inadequate housing, too many demands on energy

resources, unemployment). Also, the struggle among political powers and those of different ideologies is a concern for all of us. The everpresent threat of nuclear war and terrorism are examples. And then, of course, there is the reality of social injustice and human rights. Governments cannot--and in many cases will not--do everything that is needed to alleviate the problems. This means citizens must care enough to help, and the best place to begin is at the local level if we are to maintain a high quality of life in communities, assure social justice, and achieve human rights for all.

The current federal budget deficit and cutbacks in the level of community services have helped us to see the need for state and local governments, as well as the private sector, tc provide services for American communities. In fact, the federal government has made it clear that philanthropic and voluntary agencies should assume more financial responsibilities, as well as program management ones, in the immediate future (Demone & Gibelma, 1984). It appears that volunteerism will become necessary to the successful operation of communities. Already, communities call for volunteers in many human service areas (Laurence, 1980). They can be trained, and they can perform a variety of functions on par with paid employees in the community.

After listening to presentations by university administrators, program specialists, and local Extension agents, I am convinced that Extension agents are on the front line as persons capable of developing volunteerism at the local level. There are several reasons why they can and should do this:

1. Extension agents have a direct link with local citizens and are familiar with their existing socio-economic environment and needs.

2. The leadership of Extension agents in planning and implementing programs has already given them visibility in communities.
3. Extension agents have gained a great deal of expertise through working with millions of volunteers in program areas such as agriculture, 4-H, home economics, and community resource development.

The counties across the nation are populated with individuals with unique needs and circumstances. Also, the demographic, economic, social, and infrastructure conditions of the 3,150 counties in the United States vary considerably. There were 10,741 (full-time equivalent) Extension agents in the Cooperative Extension Service throughout the nation in 1984 (County Agent, 1985). The Extension agents vary in their basic training, interest, motivation, and experiences. Thus, it is difficult to generalize the characteristics of Extension agents. Considering the differences among them, it is impossible to make an assumption that all Extension agents will participate and cooperate to extend their services to the voluntary sector. Yet at least one agent per unit could be trained to service non-Extension-related voluntary programs.

Using Extension agents in service to the voluntary sector has advantages. During concurrent sessions of the diffusion conference on volunteerism, a panel of five agents, each involved in service to the voluntary sector, revealed that Extension agents could enhance the image of the Cooperative Extension Service by providing services to the voluntary sector. A Center for Volunteer Development (CVD) specialist asked a panel of Extension agents the following five questions:

1. What were your roles in volunteer development prior to involvement in the program of the Center for Volunteer Development at

Virginia Tech, and what did you have to do in order to accommodate the Center's work?

2. What were some of the major kinds of things that you accomplished in communities by adding services to the voluntary sector?
3. What ways have you helped or encouraged groups with whom you work to assist the voluntary sector?
4. Has the service to the voluntary sector brought new clients/groups to Extension?
5. What new information or training did you need to become more involved with special assistance to the voluntary sector?

The responses of the panel of Extension agents suggested that although service to volunteerism adds job responsibilities that increase the work load, there are positive effects for both Extension agents and Extension work. They reported heightened personal recognition, increased job satisfaction, new learning experiences, and increased visibility of the Extension organization in the local community. Although service to the voluntary sector is one of their job responsibilities, the Extension agents claimed their participation was initially voluntary in the activities of the Center for Volunteer Development because they recognized it as new and important work for Extension. It was obvious that they had devoted time to volunteerism largely because of a sincere desire to help and a belief that colleges and universities should help the voluntary sector.

Experiences of the Extension agents on the panel (and others) indicate that objectives that are short-term and perceived to be relevant for the members of the group have the best chance of attainment. Volunteer groups need help from Extension agents in exercising their roles, especi-

ally in leadership development and learning how to share leadership. Agents have found that encouraging leadership development in groups can contribute to effective and efficient goal attainment for that group.

The panel of Extension agents emphasized that the community needs volunteers and the services rendered through voluntary organizations, and that many adult people are willing to contribute their services to volunteerism by working with the local Extension agents. There are many new volunteer groups emerging in the areas of health, housing, education, economics, and community development activities. These groups, such as "Citizens on Patrol" and "Mothers Against Drunk Driving," indicate that volunteers are willing to come together around issues that are of greatest concern to them and society.

The panel of agents suggested that funding, training, and evaluation are crucial for volunteer development at the local level. It is true that "there is no free lunch." Funding from some source is necessary to ensure the continued action of many volunteer programs. Additionally, Extension agents and volunteer leaders must be adequately prepared for their roles through effective training and a flow of knowledge from state to local levels. Extension agents indicated that they have had critical situations such as "What are we supposed to do?" and "How are we supposed to do it?". Thus, training must be an on-going activity for them. Evaluation can also be an effective method of support for Extension agents. It not only indicates whether or not the Extension agents have accomplished what they set out to do, but also points to new objectives for future involvement with the voluntary sector.

Extension agents who understand the characteristics of people, their community, and the needs of both are in a good position to render their

services to the voluntary sector. Participation and contributions of those Extension agents must be recognized and supported by the administrators of the Cooperative Extension Service. A report of the joint USDA/ NASULGC committee on the future of the Cooperative Extension Service recommended that the volunteer system should be encouraged from all three legal partners--federal, state, and local governments--as it is basic to the success of the Cooperative Extension Service in the United States (USDA/ NASULGC, 1983). Accordingly, accommodation of the voluntary sector in Cooperative Extension Service programs could have many mutual benefits for agencies involved in the human service-oriented activities. These benefits might be summarized as follows:

1. A mechanism already in place can serve the same community and be used as a viable tool to raise private resources (individuals, national and local foundations, and corporations).
2. Diversity of needs and problems of the local community can be met to a substantial level through a systematic approach to tapping the expertise of Extension personnel and faculty members of local colleges and universities.
3. Participation of volunteers could be increased as a result of Extension, causing the efforts of the voluntary sector to be more visible.
4. Optimum use of resources would be enhanced.

Conclusion

Volunteerism is one way people can contribute to the common good. Extension agents are in a position to help by assisting local citizens and groups with all aspects of volunteer program planning and development.

Already, the Cooperative Extension Service works with approximately 1.5 million adult volunteers, each of whom averages more than 100 hours per year conducting Extension programs under the guidance of Extension professionals. Their time is equivalent to over 90,000 man-years. Accordingly, this service amounts to five times that of the professional staff time paid for by tax dollars (USDA/NASULGC, 1983). Thus, it is clear that there is potential for thousands of Extension agents to develop volunteer programs in the United States as a part of Extension activities.

Extension agents can be the contact persons to open community doors, not only to provide services to the voluntary sector, but also to gain local support for both voluntary and Extension organizations. However, the Extension agent's time is limited, and there is heightened competition for their multi-lateral services in the community. They must be provided with encouragement and become motivated to work with the voluntary sector. This contribution can help volunteerism to flourish in American society, and it could also be used as a model in other countries.

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